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Evading the censors: Critical journalism in authoritarian
states

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the end of World War II many parts of the world have steadily grown in a more democratic direction. But these young democracies do not always embrace all the liberal values that underpin Western democracies.

It can be argued that a democracy does not have to be built on exactly the same values as the West for it to work. Still, certain basic freedoms are necessary to secure a functioning democracy. Two of these values are freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Media freedom is a precondition of democracy because for democracy to work, there must be public participation. In a democracy people have the right to choose their own leaders and with them, the political direction of their country. To be able to choose freely, voters must have access to information about different political ideas and choices, and what the different politicians represent.

Without media freedom voters will not have sufficient information to make informed decisions. Thus, countries that in theory are democratic, but do not practice press freedom, cannot be considered fully functional democracies. These states must be said to be authoritarian to various degrees.

Still, even in authoritarian states, journalists can find ways of publishing sensitive material. That happens because the authorities do not exercise complete and total control of the media, either because they can't or because they do not need to, but also because journalists exploit cracks in the censorship regimes.

My aim in this paper is to find out what methods journalists use to circumvent censors in semi-democratic authoritarian states. In this context I will define semi-democratic states as states that have some democratic functions, like reasonably valid elections, but are ruled by regimes that in practice limit the real exercise of democracy. These limitations include restricting oppositional politics and crucially, limiting free speech and censoring the media.

Case studies

I have chosen four countries to look into: Malaysia, Singapore, Russia and Venezuela. The countries have been selected because they all nominally are democracies, but they also have restrictions on those democracies. They all have elected governments that are supported by large portions of the

population. They all guarantee their citizens free speech and freedom of the press through their constitutions, but none of them have a free media in practice. Malaysia, Singapore, Russia and Venezuela all have both official and unofficial censorship. They are all rated low on media freedom indexes published by NGOs like Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House.

These four countries all have different governmental structures, and varying degrees of media censorship. There are some similarities in the media environment in these states, and in the way their governments control the media, but there are also significant differences in their censorship methods. Even though media censorship is widespread in these countries, their governments do not have totalitarian control of the press. Instead, much of the censorship happens through indirect methods. The censorship is usually executed by soft methods, by which I mean non-violent methods, although violence against journalists does occur in some of the countries.

All these countries have laws of different kinds that put limits on media content. However, censorship laws are often not concerned with political content. Instead, the laws limit media freedom in other ways, for example by prohibiting the promotion of drugs, publication of indecent content or insulting the rulers. But although the wording in those laws is not directed against political reporting, they are used to muffle sensitive political content in the media.

Censorship can also be indirect. For example, some governments stop doing business with firms that advertise in opposition media. In all of the countries I study, the government and government allies own key media outlets. Other ways of controlling the press include restrictions on crucial imported necessities like paper, and strict media licenses needed to operate.

Even so, with censors trying to stop critical voices, journalists find ways to circumvent the censors. The censorship environment is different in the four countries, and journalists operate in different ways to circumvent them. But there are also common features in censorship evading in these countries.

There are of course several other countries that fall into the wide category of semi-authoritarian states. The countries I have chosen cover several different forms of censorship regimes.

Methodology

I have interviewed journalists and others with media experience in the four countries. I have asked them about their own experiences with censorship, what they know about the use of censorship and

if they have used methods to evade censors, and also what they generally know about censorship and in what way journalists circumvent censorship in their countries. The interviews have been conducted by telephone, Skype and email.

Not all the people I have spoken to want to reveal their names. Those who did not wish to have their names disclosed are referred to by their positions. My sources are the following:

Singapore

B. N. Balji, journalist for the online newspaper The Independent.

Malaysia

Sonia Randhawa, former Malaysian journalist and currently working on a Ph. D. at the University of Melbourne, on the role of women journalists in the Malay-language press from 1987 to 1998.

Russia

Andrej Babitsky, journalist and editor at the Russian edition of Esquire. Elizaveta Surganova, journalist for the Russian edition of Forbes magazine.

Alexander Polivanov, journalist for the business newspaper Vedomosti.

Polina Myakinchenko, Russian freelance journalist, based in Paris.

Venezuela

Source A: Editor of a newsletter.

Source B: Member of the editorial board of a Venezuelan newspaper.

Paula Ramon: Former journalist for several Venezuelan newspapers, including *Últimas Noticias*, the best-selling newspaper in Venezuela. Ramon is currently living and working in Brazil.

This paper will not give a complete overview of the media in the surveyed countries. Nor will it present a definitive overview of the ways journalists work to evade censors. That would be beyond the scope of my research and my sources are too few to give a complete picture. I will present a glimpse of what journalists think of the censorship environment in which they work, and how they themselves and their colleagues operate in that environment and find ways to circumvent censorship in their respective countries. In the course of my research,

I have identified several methods journalists use to evade the censors: (1) hide content; (2) use press conferences to air critical views; (3) use media not associated with politics; (4) operate media from abroad; (5) share content and (6) use the internet.

Chapter 2: Country backgrounds

The various countries I surveyed have different forms of government and use different forms of censorship. There are therefore also some variations in what the media is allowed to publish, although they all make it difficult for journalists to publish material that challenges official policies.

Russia

Russian censorship dates back to the very beginning of the czarist empire, when the Church had complete control over what could be printed in the country. Eventually the czars took control over the censorship themselves. After the October revolution in 1917 the new Soviet rulers saw no reason to ease the censorship.

The Russian media world went through some radical changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While some post-Soviet republics, most notably the Baltic states, moved in a democratic direction and embraced openness and a free press, most of the countries of the former Soviet states continued in the Soviet ways, with the media under firm state control.

Russia, on the other hand, first plunged into a rather chaotic political period. In the 1990s Russians enjoyed previously unheard of press freedom, but without any tradition of media freedom, this led to a rather chaotic, corrupt and partisan press. This period did not last very long. After Vladimir Putin was first elected president, he moved quickly to rein in the media. One of the first things he did was to ensure that the three biggest TV stations came under government control.

Today, censorship in Russia basically takes two forms. The first one is that the government control the most important media, either through direct state ownership or ownership by close allies of Putin. The second method of censorship is by law. Russia does not have laws to restrict political content, but the government uses other laws, like those against the promotion of drugs, to punish media that go too far with their political coverage.

Russian journalists also face the threat of violence. Freedom House lists several instances of threats and violence against Russian journalists, usually those who report on local corruption or organised crime. According to Freedom House, “impunity for those who commit violence against journalists is a serious and long-standing problem.”¹ The Committee to Protect Journalists estimates that 56

1 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/russia#.VDerdBYTazY>

journalists were killed in Russia between 1992 and the end of 2013². Only 3 percent of the cases have been solved. In some cases government officials are the suspected perpetrators, but even if the Kremlin or local government officials are not behind the violence, the fact that it happens and rarely leads to prosecution, creates an atmosphere of fear, and may give journalists second thoughts when reporting on organised crime or corruption.

Even though Russia is a highly centralised polity, the censorship of local media happens at local levels, which means that restrictions on local media can be even stricter than for national media. One way of censoring the local media is for government-owned companies to refuse to advertise or put pressure on private companies, so that they do not advertise either.

Russia is ranked 148 of 180 countries on Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2014³. Freedom House considers both the media in Russia and the country in general “not free”⁴.

Malaysia

The Federation of Malaya became independent from Britain in 1957. In 1963 the British territories of Singapore and northern Borneo became independent, and joined the federation to form Malaysia. Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965 because of ideological (and partly ethnic) differences.

Malaysia is a federal constitutional monarchy, with a parliamentary democratic system based on the British version. The king's role is mainly ceremonial and the position rotates between several hereditary rulers. Since independence political power has been highly concentrated, and the multiparty coalition Barisan Nasional (BN, former Alliance Party) has been in power since independence.

While Malaysia is a democracy, the long reign of the BN has led to an intertwining of the government, the ruling party and administration that blurs the lines between the party, the judiciary and public administration. Opposition politicians often face harassment from the government. The opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim of the People's Justice Party has been convicted of sodomy, which is a crime in Malaysia. The conviction is pending an appeal (as of July 2014), and is largely

2

<http://cpj.org/killed/europe/russia/>

3 <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>

4 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/country/russia>

believed to be politically motivated. Freedom House consider Malaysia a “partly free” country⁵.

The media, on the other hand, is branded “not free”. Large parts of the media are owned by the government, government parties or organisations with connections to the government. Article 10 in the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, but Malaysia has got strict media laws which limit this right. The Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 requires all printing presses to have a government licence to operate. The broadcasting company Astro provides satellite receiving equipment in collaboration with the government, and has a monopoly on satellite reception. It is illegal to own satellite receiving equipment that is provided by Astro without a licence.

Not only local news outlets are being censored. In April 2011 Astro removed parts of the BBC's and al-Jazeera's coverage of a big demonstration in Kuala Lumpur. Astro defended the action by saying they had to comply with local regulations⁶, while the information, communication and culture minister said that only the “best part” of BBC report was shown⁷.

Political content is not the only content that is censored. There is also social, religious and moral censorship. Particularly, certain religious words like Allah, hadith, imam and several others cannot be used by non-Muslims in any publication. In 2012 the newspaper The Star published a picture of the American singer Erykah Badu with the word Allah in Arabic painted on her body. Two editors were indefinitely suspended as a result, and The Star published an apology. The singer's scheduled concert in Malaysia was cancelled.

Malaysia is 147th on Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2014.

Singapore

Singapore gained independence when it was kicked out of Malaysia in 1965. Since then, Singapore has been ruled by the People's Action Party (PAP) without interruption. Singapore's first elected Prime Minister was Lee Kuan Yew, who held the post until 1990. After that he held positions as Senior Minister and Minister Mentor. During Yew's reign Singapore experienced unprecedented economic growth, and is now a developed country with a free and open business climate. Unlike the other countries in my survey, corruption in Singapore is almost non-existent.

5 <http://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia>

6 <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/astro-says-bbcs-bersih-coverage-cut-to-suit-local-laws>

7 <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/rais-defends-astro-says-best-parts-of-bbc-bersih-clip-shown/>

The freedom of the economy does not extend to other parts of Singaporean society. Singapore is a parliamentary republic, where the president holds a largely ceremonial post. The parliament is elected, but Singapore is generally not considered a fully democratic country. The domination of the PAP makes the country in many cases function like a one party state. Opposition politicians are sometimes sued for libel or slander. The courts do not have juries, and verdicts are decided by government-appointed judges. Opposition politicians have accused the judges of being partial to the government.

The media is even less free than other parts of Singapore's civil society, according to Freedom House, which rates the country as “partly free”, but the media as “not free”⁸. The media landscape shares some similarities with its larger neighbour Malaysia. As in Malaysia, the government and companies linked to the government own all the large media institutions in the country.

Singapore's Media Development Authorities regulate content, and ban material deemed harmful or immoral. Private ownership of satellite dishes is not allowed. The government defends the censorship, and argues that the media laws are in place to prevent frictions between the various ethnic and religious groups in the country.

The most famous instance of censorship in Singapore was when the article “Disneyland with the Death Penalty” by the American author William Gibson was published in Wired magazine in 1993⁹. Wired was subsequently banned from Singapore. Still, some Singapore media try to do balanced and fair reporting. This is specially the case for online media, which are given much more freedom than traditional media.

Singapore is number 150 on Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2014.

Venezuela

Venezuela is in many ways a different case from Russia, Malaysia and Singapore, both when it comes to the political structure and the media landscape. It has a much more diverse political landscape and less government-controlled media than the other three countries. Still, the government is generally considered to be authoritarian in many ways, and the press is under considerable pressure. Freedom House ranks Venezuela as country “partly free”, and the media in

8 <http://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore>

9 <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/1.04/gibson.html>

Venezuela as “not free”¹⁰.

Venezuela is a centralised republic, where the elected president is both head of state and head of government. The current president is Nicolás Maduro, who inherited the “Bolivarian revolution” of his predecessor Hugo Chávez when the latter died of cancer in 2013.

Like other countries in Latin America, Venezuela has a history of dictatorships and coups d'état, but has been a democracy (albeit with flaws) since 1958. Hugo Chávez came to power in 1998, after a tumultuous period in Venezuelan politics, which included two coup attempts by Chávez in 1992.

Venezuela has a long history of opposition media that are outspoken and critical of the government. State-owned TV channels play an important role in the media landscape, but Venezuela also has got a large privately-owned media sector. In fact, most of the media in Venezuela is in private hands, although the government and people close to the government have been buying media outlets in the last few years. According to the BBC, 70 percent of the media in Venezuela is private, while five percent is state-owned and 25 percent is community run¹¹. The numbers may hide part of the truth, as some private media are controlled by people close to the government.

After Chávez came to power, his socialist ideology and politics were heavily criticised by the private media. While the government use state media as a mouthpiece for their own opinions, the private media are generally considered partisan and are often fiercely anti-government.

“In Venezuela there is no really free journalism. The journalists are either with the government or against the government, and most of the private newspapers are against the government,” says the Venezuelan journalist Paula Ramon.

Chávez’s response to criticism was fierce verbal attacks on independent media, the withdrawal of media licences and other ways to silence critical voices.

Unlike the other countries in my survey, Venezuela has also got a very polarised political landscape, with a large and active opposition. While it is important to bear in mind the polarised nature of the Venezuelan media, and how it can affect the totality of content, it does not detract from the fact that the government limits the press in serious ways. Journalists in Venezuela do not work in a free

10 <http://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela>

11 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19368807>

environment. Private media have experienced harassment by government officials. Journalists have been jailed or have received death threats. TV stations are required by law to air live government broadcasts, so-called '*cadena*', whenever the President demands it. Currency exchange regulations and import control are used by the government to restrict private newspapers access to paper.

Hugo Chávez died in March 2013. His successor Nicolás Maduro has continued to clamp down on independent media. According to Freedom House, the "patterns of excessive government involvement in the affairs of the private press grew worse" under the new government. The sources I have interviewed for this paper agree with that assessment.

Venezuela is 116th on Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2014. Freedom House consider the media in Venezuela as "not free".

Chapter 3: Methods of censorship

The countries I have surveyed have different ways of dealing with the media, but there are also several similarities. As the countries are not outright dictatorships, their governments usually use “soft censorship”, which means that violence and intimidation is not commonly used, and that they do not exercise totalitarian control over the media. I have covered some of the methods in my description of each country, but I will now go into more details.

3.1 Laws

Most countries in the world, if not all, have laws that regulate the media in some ways. For broadcast media, there needs to be ways to divide the electromagnetic spectrum between the various operators. Laws against libel is fairly common, as well as laws against hate speech, such as racism or attacks on religion. These may be laws that are not directed particularly at the media. And while they may limit free speech to some extent, they can exist without being considered censorship laws.

Laws in Russia

But in many circumstances these kinds of laws *can* be used as censorship tools. Russia, for instance, has a law that forbids the promotion of drugs. This law is used as a pretext to stop or warn media that publish sensitive material. In December 2011 the Russian edition of Esquire ran a story about the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, with a picture of him on the cover. In the same issue they also published a report about the online marketplace Silk Road, where, among other things, illegal drugs were sold. Because of this article Esquire was accused of promoting drugs, and got a warning from the Federal Drug Control Service of Russia.

When a publication gets two warnings during one year, their publishing licence can be revoked. This law is also used to blacklist web pages, both domestic and international, and make them unavailable for Russian internet users. The advantage with this method is that it is not always clear whether action is being taken against drug promotion or to censor something else. The government can claim that no political censorship has been exercised, but the editors will perceive it as a warning against unwanted political coverage.

Russia also has got laws against "offending religious feelings of the faithful" and promoting “non-traditional sexual relationships” to minors, as well as laws against defamation and a very wide definition of extremism, which can be used to prosecute journalists.

Laws in Malaysia

Malaysia has several strict laws that limit free speech and freedom of the press. The Sedition Act criminalises speech with "seditious tendency", which is very broadly defined. Among the acts defined as having a seditious tendency are acts with a tendency "to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against any Ruler or against any Government", "to excite the subjects of the Ruler or the inhabitants of any territory governed by any government to attempt to procure in the territory of the Ruler or governed by the Government, the alteration, otherwise than by lawful means, of any matter as by law established", and "to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in Malaysia or in any State"¹².

In 2003 the online newspaper Malaysiakini was temporarily shut down under the Sedition Act after it published a letter criticising Malay special rights and compared the Youth wing of a government party to the Ku Klux Klan.

The 1988 Broadcasting Act allows the Information Ministry to decide who can own a broadcast station and what type of television service is suitable for the Malaysian public, leading to considerable self-censorship among broadcast journalists.

Laws in Singapore

Like Malaysia, Singapore has a Sedition Act (which in both countries originated during British colonial rule), with similar wording. According to the law, seditious acts include those which "bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the Government", or "bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in Singapore".

In addition, several other laws can be used to limit press freedom. "The Newspapers and Printing Presses Act, the Defamation Act, the Internal Security Act (ISA), and articles in the penal code allow the authorities to block the circulation of news deemed to incite violence, arouse racial or religious tensions, interfere in domestic politics, or threaten public order, the national interest, or national security," writes Freedom House in their 2013 report.

Laws in Venezuela

¹² <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/malaysia>

In 2010 the National Assembly ratified two laws directed at the media; the Venezuela Organic Law on Telecommunications (Lotel) and Social Responsibility in Radio, TV and Electronic Media Law (Resortemec Law).

The Resortemec Law applies to websites as well as radio and TV stations, and imposed heavy fines on media that “incite or promote criminal activity”, “cause panic or disturb public order”, or “discredit legitimately constituted authorities”. The Lotel law regulates broadcast frequencies and prohibits any foreign investment in over-the-air radio and TV broadcasting, community broadcasting and national radio and TV production¹³.

3.2 Licences

All four countries require media outlets to obtain licences from the state to be allowed to operate, as is the norm in authoritarian states. For TV and radio broadcast through terrestrial networks, licences are necessary when assigning parts of the electromagnetic spectrum to the various actors, but for other types of media the only explanation for having a licensing regime is control.

In Singapore all print media must have a valid licence, which is renewable every year. The government can decide not to renew a licence without giving any reason. Thus, when a media organisation does not get a licence renewed, journalists will not know exactly where the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable content lies. This leads to self-censorship.

“It is like a sword hanging over our heads,” the Singapore journalist B. N. Balji puts it.

Malaysia revised its licensing laws in 2012. Publishers and printing firms are no longer required to obtain an annual operating permit, as the 1984 Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) previously required. But licences are still needed to operate, and the government can revoke them without having to give a reason.

In Venezuela, the government is also using licences to control opposition media. Critical TV and radio stations risk not having their licences renewed. The most (in)famous incident was when CONATEL refused to renew the terrestrial broadcasting licence of RCTV (*Radio Caracas*

13 <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2013/venezuela>

Television) in 2007. RCTV appealed, but Hugo Chávez intervened and ordered by decree that the channel's frequency would be given to a public service channel¹⁴. RCTV reopened as a cable channel. They were temporary closed again when it refused to broadcast the president's *cadenas*.

In 2009 the government reviewed the broadcast licences of several hundred radio and TV stations. 32 privately-owned radio stations and two regional television stations were closed immediately, on the grounds that their broadcast licences had expired or that they had violated regulations. According to Venezuelan officials, the licences were handed over to community media.

Newspapers, radio and TV stations in Russia need licences to operate. Licences can be withdrawn for violations of various laws. In 2006 the local newspaper *Gorodskiye vesti* in Volgograd had its licence withdrawn after a complaint by the ruling party United Russia. The offending article had the title "No room for racists in power" accompanied by an illustration depicting Jesus Christ, Moses, Buddha and Mohammed in front of a television showing two groups of people about to start a fight. The caption said, "We did not teach them to do that". The licence was officially withdrawn for incitement of religious hatred. The real reasons for the closure of the newspaper remain unclear, but some speculate that it was caused by a power struggle in the local government¹⁵.

3.3 Government-controlled media

A simple and practical way of censoring the media is for the government to own the media themselves. If that is a too obvious method, people close to the government or who depend on it get to own the media. In Russia, Malaysia and Singapore, this is the case for most of the large media outlets. In Venezuela the government controls parts of the media, and according to the interviewees for this paper, looks set to increase its share.

As we have seen, in Russia, there is a long tradition of government-controlled media. During Soviet times, although there was a wide selection of newspapers and publications available, they were all owned by the party, party organisations, various government agencies and businesses, and local governments.

As we have said above, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia saw a brief period of press

14 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19368807>

15 <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1065893.html>

freedom during the years of Boris Yeltsin. Much of the state-owned media was privatised. Many of the biggest media outlets ended up in the hands of the newly rich oligarchs. When Vladimir Putin was elected president in 2000, one of the first things he did was to secure control over the three biggest TV stations in Russia.

According to the people I interviewed, ownership is the Kremlin's preferred method of controlling the media. Russian authorities own several media outlets directly, but a lot of them are owned by oligarchs close to the Kremlin. When a critical media outlet becomes too popular, or moves beyond certain boundaries, the oligarch owner will replace the editor.

The story about the popular online newspaper Lenta.ru illustrates this well. Lenta was known for its independent reporting and is one of the most popular online resources in Russia. In March 2014 Lenta published a report from Ukraine, covering the political turmoil in the country. Shortly afterwards, the owner, Alexander Mamut, fired the editor in chief, Galina Timchenko. Several journalists quit their job as a response. Many of the journalists who worked at Lenta believe the change of editor was politically motivated, and found less journalistic freedom under the new editor.

“When our editor in chief was fired, 50 journalists said they would not work with the new editor. But we had to work one or two weeks in the new situation. In these two weeks he asked us to work, we wrote one article about how our parliament voted to allow the president to use power in Ukraine. That decision was made as a result of juridical mistakes. And we wrote about these mistakes. But our new editor in chief asked us not to publish it on the front page. This is a kind of direct censorship, and it is an example of how it might be in other newspapers and other media,” says Alexander Polivanov, one of the former journalists at Lenta.ru.

The advantage with this kind of censorship (from the government's point of view) is that it keeps the journalists on their toes.

“The situation in the Russian media is that almost all big newspapers or web sites are now owned by rich people who are quite close to the government. And they fired a lot of editors in chief in the last year and a half, and we really don't know if it is about politics or about censorship, but it looks like it is censorship. Maybe the most important thing about censorship is to make a situation in which every journalist thinks about self-censorship. It's not direct censorship, but the atmosphere in the media is that you think five times “Do I really want to write about this?”, says Polivanov, who now works for the business newspaper Vedomosti.

According to the journalist Elizaveta Surganova, businessmen need to be on good terms with the authorities to be able to operate. This makes them vulnerable to pressure.

“85 or 90 percent of the media in Russia, I am talking about nationwide media, is controlled by oligarchs, and if you are an oligarch you have to have some connections to the Kremlin - there is no way of doing business in Russia, I mean big business in Russia, and avoiding it – so basically the media are a weak point for any businessman who owns a newspaper or TV channel. And this weak point is being used against him. He is always scared.

[...] If they own an opposition newspaper and they come to the Kremlin to do business, they will be told that 'look, you own an opposition TV channel, you have to do something with it, and then we will talk to you'.”

The oligarchs do not necessarily own media because they want to, but because they are encouraged by the Kremlin.

“For some of them, this is kind of a burden, I think. [...] From what I see and from what I hear from a lot of people many of the oligarchs are not very happy with this situation [...] But, well, they have to do that. Someone has to control the media,” says Surganova.

The situation in Venezuela is different, because there are still numerous private media outlets. But since Hugo Chávez came to power, the government has expanded its media ownership. According to Freedom House, the government officially controls 10 television networks, 25 radio stations, a news agency, 3 newspapers, and a magazine.

In 2013 the TV station *Globovisión* and *Cadena Capriles* newspaper conglomerate was bought by business interests close to the government. There are also a number of community media outlets – TV stations, radio stations and newspapers – that generally carry government-produced content.

In Singapore, the media is dominated by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and MediaCorp. The owners of SPH have close links with the ruling party and MediaCorp is owned by the government investment company Temasek Holdings.

In Malaysia too, the government is a dominant player. The government runs the state broadcasting

corporation RTM and the news agency Bernema, which operates radio and TV channels. The main government party United Malays National Organisation owns Media Prima, another big broadcaster.

3.4 Currency regulations and import controls

A way for governments to control the media is to control the distribution of necessary equipment and materials. Of the countries I have studied, only Venezuela exercised this kind of censorship. Venezuela has got strict currency controls, which means that newspapers need permission from the government to buy foreign currency in order to import paper. According to my sources it is more difficult for opposition and private newspaper to buy foreign currency than for newspapers owned by the government or people close to the government.

“Now we are going through a period when they are not giving authorisation to import paper, so most of the papers in the country are down to just a very few pages. The subliminal message is “if you are not nice, you will not get paper”. Those who are with the government will get all the paper they will ever need,” says source A, an editor of a Venezuelan newsletter.

3.5 Controlling cyberspace

In many authoritarian countries the internet is a haven of free speech – or if not totally free, at least freer than in traditional media. Journalists confirm that the internet is much less restricted than traditional media in all the four countries. Some journalists use social media and other internet outlets to publish material that is not possible to publish in traditional media, and online newspapers are generally confined by less strict censorship laws.

But increasingly, governments in authoritarian countries try to restrict online content. One reason is that as online media become more widely read, the online content becomes more of a threat to the authorities. Another reason is that tools for surveillance of the internet and for blocking targeted pages become more readily available.

Online media has so far been less restricted than traditional media in most places. Journalists in traditional media have been taking advantage of this, and for instance have used social media to air views that are not possible through traditional outlets.

But now there seems to be a change in government attitudes towards digital media. Until now, online media have been less controlled by authorities than traditional media (print, TV and radio). But as digital media is becoming a bigger threat to governments, it is likely that they will crack down harder on dissent there.

There are already some signs of this happening. Russia is blacklisting internet sites with sensitive content, and has recently introduced a law that requires bloggers to certify the factual accuracy of the information in their blogs. In Venezuela, at least on one occasion the government blocked certain features of the microblogging site Twitter.

Chapter 4: Avoiding the censors

Even in an environment of censorship, journalists find ways of getting information and opinions past the censors. This happens even in stricter censorship regimes than the ones I have been studying, but more totalitarian regimes tolerate less critical journalism. My aim is to find out how journalists evade the censors in countries that lie in between outright dictatorships and liberal democracies.

My research has unveiled several ways of circumventing censorship. Many of the methods are used by journalists in several different countries, but the different media environments and variations in the way censorship works does not make all of them effective in every country.

I have identified the following six ways to circumvent censorship:

4.1. Hide sensitive content

In some countries journalists find creative ways of presenting their stories, so that information considered too sensitive by the government will pass the below the censors' radar. There are two ways this can be done: journalists can put sensitive content towards the end of articles, so that the probability of officials noticing them is smaller, or they can phrase sensitive content in certain ways that disguise the true meaning.

It is a method that has been used by journalists in dictatorships for decades (if not centuries). Journalists in the Soviet Union developed this form of coded messaging almost to an art form.

But although it was widely used in Soviet times, it is not commonly used in Russia today, according to the people I have interviewed. But journalists in other countries are including hidden messages in their articles. Of the countries I have studied, it occurs in Singapore and Malaysia.

“You put the facts in there, but they are buried, so they slip through the net. So for example, if you wanted to cover something by the opposition politicians, you would write it right at the bottom end of the story, you would write it in terms that, ask, like “guess what the opposition has come up with now?” kind of tone to the stories, rather than putting them in a more positive light, even if that's not how the journalists themselves see the stories,” says Randhawa about the Malaysian media.

But she adds that this was more prevalent prior to the internet era, and that the Malaysian media give more space to the political opposition now.

“Nowadays there is a lot more neutral coverage of the opposition than there used to be. But previously the opposition would only get in if they were being criticised. So that was how journalists would sometimes circumvent the inability to cover opposition events and opposition statements. It gets the government response to the opposition, rather than cover what the opposition are saying,” she says.

In Singapore, on the other hand, the online journalists take advantage of hidden messages in traditional newspapers.

“Information will appear in the paper. Hidden gems. Just a mention in the article. But you need time and patience. It becomes a research tool. We can turn it around in an online commentary. Sometimes it is the angle of the article. The angle is pro-government, but other information is hidden in the article,” says the Singaporean journalist B. N. Bajli.

According to the people I have spoken to about the Venezuelan media, the method of burying sensitive information in articles is not common practice for journalists there.

4.2. Ask critical questions at press conferences

It is not uncommon for government officials to avoid giving direct answers to critical questions, both in authoritarian and democratic countries. In countries with a free press, the media can discuss the evasive answers of politicians, write editorials and ask opposition politicians for their opinion. This is often not possible for journalists in authoritarian states.

Still, it may pay off for journalists to ask critical questions at press conferences. The questions may not be answered, but can spur further investigations and debate all the same. Critical questions may trigger other journalists to ask further questions, or the issues will be communicated on web sites and through social media.

“Asking the questions at press conferences, that in itself can be, is, sometimes a very courageous act, but it also helps to get the story out there, because the journalists then 'open' the answers to the questions, including those in the online media, where there is more room to report,” says Sonia

Rawandhra.

If the press conference is broadcast live, the audience will hear the questions.

“It is also the case, one reporter said to me, that if it is on TV, then you know, the question's asked, the question's broadcast, so there is also that aspect of things. It isn't necessarily that they will be able to report it or that they expect it to come out in the print, but it might come out online, where there is a lot more freedom to publish,” says Rawandhra.

This is not possible in all countries. In Venezuela, critical journalists will generally not be invited to government press conferences. If they are there, they will not be the ones allowed to ask questions.

“If it is a government press conference, the critical journalists cannot ask [questions]. If it is broadcast on TV, they will say they are going to give five questions from five media. It is going to be five government media. They are never going to choose private media,” says Paula Ramon.

This is generally the situation in Russia as well. If someone asks a critical question at a press conference in Russia, the reporter might not be invited back the next time.

4.3. Publish sensitive material in media not associated with politics

There are some examples of media not associated with news reporting or political coverage being able to slip sensitive content past the censors. In Malaysia, for instance, the business media can push the boundaries a bit more than regular news media.

“So for example, the radio station which is doing the most interesting work in terms of reporting and comment is BFM, which is the business station. It's English language, it is only broadcast in urban areas, and I think that that has something to do with why they are given a lot more leeway than stations that broadcast particularly in Malay, but also with a wider coverage area. BFM certainly pushes the boundaries. There is no doubt that the journalists working there are taking steps to try and increase spaces of freedom of expression in Malaysia.

The most concrete example was their election coverage last year. They covered the 2013 election under “the battle for Malaysia” tag line. But prior to the election they actually got a warning,

reminding them that they had to stick to business and finance, because that's what their licence remit is limited to. And yet they went ahead anyway with the election coverage. As yet there haven't been any concrete repercussions from that. But certainly it hasn't helped their relationship with regulators," says Sonia Rwandhra.

Another example is from Russia, where lifestyle magazines occasionally publish political articles. According to the journalist and editor Andrej Babitskij from the Russian edition of Esquire, that magazine is able to publish sensitive content that other publications would not be able to.

There could also be other reasons why Esquire is able to publish critical articles. It is owned by foreigners, which makes it more difficult for Russian authorities to put pressure on the editors through the owners. Also, it does have a limited audience, and there are signs the Russian authorities will allow media to be critical as long as they have limited impact.

4.4. Operate media from abroad

To operate media from abroad has been common for dissidents in dictatorships for a long time. The internet makes it easy to make content produced abroad available, as most countries that are not outright dictatorships usually do not block web sites (although it happens, and may increase in the future, as online media becomes more influential). In modern semi-authoritarian states it is not therefore generally considered necessary to operate media from abroad.

The exception is Venezuela, where some opposition media have moved abroad. One example is the blog *Infodio* about Venezuelan affairs, which is operated from London, and run by the Venezuelan journalist and activist Alek Boyd.

4.5. Share content with media outlets less likely to be censored

As I have noted, in some countries certain types of media are less likely to be censored than others. This could be because they are smaller, and therefore not considered significant enough to be bothered (Russia), that the media is not generally associated with political coverage (Malaysia, Russia) or that they are abroad and not within reach of the censors (Venezuela). This opens the possibility for journalists in one media to share sensitive content with other media outlets that are able to publish it.

A person on the editorial board of a Venezuelan newspaper (source B) said that newspapers are afraid to publish articles that are critical of the government or articles that expose misconduct unless they are certain everything in the article is 100 percent true. Even a minor error will trigger a lawsuit from the government.

If the journalists in his paper have discovered a newsworthy story and there is any room for doubt, they will not print it. However, they sometimes send their stories to a foreign newspaper. When the story is released abroad, they can quote the foreign source and write about the story that way.

Since the Russian way of censorship usually relies on the editors' willingness to appease the authorities, it opens up a possibility for journalists when their employer decides to kill a story. Occasionally they can take their story to another editor.

A journalist for the publication *Russkaya Planeta* wrote an article about disagreements between the Orthodox Church in Russia and Abkhazia, a breakaway republic from Georgia that is under Russian protection¹⁶. *Russkaya Planeta* would not publish the story, but the journalist who wrote the story went to the online publication *Lenta.ru* instead and got it published there.

Lenta also published a story about the violent nationalist group *Born*, which originally was written for weekly magazine *Kommersant Vlast*, but the publication decided to kill the article¹⁷.

This method relies on the goodwill of the journalist's original employer (at least if the journalist wants to keep a good relationship with his/her editor) and that other publications are willing to publish it.

4.6. Online media

Internet has opened up a lot of possibilities for journalists in semi-authoritarian states. In many countries online media is a place where journalists have got more freedom than in traditional media. The online world also gives room for other people than professional journalists to express their views, like bloggers, activists and opposition politicians. Some countries have been slow to adapt

16 <http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/09/20/abhaz/>

17 <http://lenta.ru/articles/2014/02/17/born/>

their media laws to all particularities of the online media. The undefined borders between traditional journalism, blogs and social media make censorship more complicated.

As I have noted, Singaporean journalists find ways of giving away sensitive information by hiding it in articles. This means that the reader must take time to go through the stories to find what the Singaporean journalist B. N. Balji calls “hidden gems”. This provides an opening for online journalists, as digital media in Singapore has much more freedom than traditional media.

“The online media is more vibrant. It is still in its infancy. They are very bold. They expose the government in many ways,” says Balji.

Still, the online media in Singapore does little investigative reporting. Instead they feature comments and analysis. One of the things they do, according to Balji, is to go through traditional newspapers thoroughly, analyse the content and expose the “hidden gems”.

In Malaysia too, the online media are pushing the boundaries when it comes to publishing, where the online newspaper Malaysiakini has been paving the way.

“In the online media landscape we have very well-established news web sites, which take a very mainstream view of what journalism is, in terms of independence, balanced reporting, things like that, and I think the foremost of these is probably Malaysiakini. Most of the other news web sites have some form of wires, in terms of the funding, in terms of the party political connections they have. But it does mean that there's a diversity of views available,” says Sonia Rawandhra.

The online media in Malaysia is not unaffected by censorship. But the nature of the internet makes some compromises possible. When the radio station BFM interviewed the opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in 2013, they were not allowed to put the interview on air or make references to it. They could however publish it online¹⁸, although without a reference on the front page. Listeners had to know about the interview to be able to find it and listen to it.

“They couldn't talk about the interview on their news shows, and they couldn't talk about the interview anywhere on air. They could put it up on their web site, and that was it,” says Rawandhra.

18 <http://www.bfm.my/bfmuncensored-anwar-ibrahim.html>

The inability to air the interview on radio is obviously a case of censorship, but BFM found a way of circumventing the censors by making the sensitive material available, although for a much more limited audience.

In Venezuela online media have become a very important outlet for journalists. Blogs and social media has become some of the few places where critical journalism can reach a wide audience. Sometimes journalists in traditional media publish additional content through these channels, when it is impossible for them to use traditional media.

When Hugo Chávez became ill with cancer, his condition was kept secret by the Venezuelan government. The news was first reported on Twitter by the experienced journalist Nelson Bocaranda, a well-known commentator, gossip columnist and investigative journalist in Venezuela. In February 2012 Bocaranda broke the news that Chávez was in Cuba for cancer treatment. His twitter account and web site *Runrunes* (rumours) have since become important sources of information.

Twitter and other social media have become essential for spreading news and information throughout Venezuela, and not only by journalists. The internet is being used to spread information not available in traditional media, and people often trust social media more than TV and newspapers.

“More and more people decide to write, and like to write about Venezuela. A lot of journalists have blogs. They have free internet. In the last two years people use blogs and twitter to know what is happening in the country. For example, my mom doesn't live in Caracas. When she wants to know what is happening in Caracas, if there are some riots or whatever, she goes to the internet, and she goes to blogs and international media to know what is happening in Caracas. Because on TV, on radio, in newspapers, you cannot know,” says Paula Ramon.

Social media are not immune to censorship. In February 2014 there were large protests against the government of President Maduro. Protesters posted photographs from the demonstrations on Twitter. The government responded by blocking the photographs. This was confirmed by a spokesperson from Twitter. Zello, a smart phone app that lets users use cell phones as walkie-talkies, was also targeted.

For many years the Internet in Russia was left unattended by Russian authorities. Online

newspapers were allowed much more freedom than traditional media.

“That is because the Russian government has not regarded the internet as something serious. They are now paying more and more attention to the Internet, to Yandex, which is a search Engine, to Vkontakte, which is a social network. Until a year ago the internet was kind of like a free space, also because of Facebook and Twitter. Right now they are talking about closing more social networks,” says Elizaveta Surganova.

Events in 2014 indicate that the Kremlin wants tighter control of the internet. In July Russia enacted a new law on social media. The law requires bloggers with more than 3,000 daily readers to register with the mass media regulator, Roskomnadzor, and conform to the regulations that govern the country's larger media outlets. Internet companies will also be required to allow Russian authorities access to users' information¹⁹.

In April 2014, Pavel Durov, the founder of the social network VKontakte (the biggest social network in Russia) was forced to give control of the company to Igor Sechin and Alisher Usmanov, investors with close ties to Putin²⁰.

19 <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/an-internet-censorship-law-right-out-of-1984/498982.html>

20 <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/vkontakte-founder-pavel-durov-learns-hes-been-fired-through-media/498641.html>

Chapter 5: Conclusions

I stated in my introduction that a functioning democracy requires a free press. Singapore, Malaysia, Russia and Venezuela cannot be regarded as fully functioning democracies, and one of the reasons is that they all censor the media to some degree.

Still, all these countries have some forms of independent media, and there is room for journalists to publish critical and sensitive material, and thus perform their role in a democracy, if only partly. The freer media outlets have less reach than the rest of the media, so their impact is limited. But the fact that they exist, and provide critical journalism for those who look for it, provides some basis for diverse political discussion that the governments often try to avoid.

Unfortunately it is not guaranteed that a little bit of freedom necessarily will lead to more. When an outspoken media outlet becomes too big, the governments often will crack down. This was the case with Lenta.ru in Russia, and the censorship of Twitter during the February 2014 demonstrations in Venezuela. In Malaysia however, the media seems to be inching towards more freedom, particularly as online journalism becomes more prevalent. Malaysia scored 71 on Freedom House's Press Freedom Index (where 100 means the least amount of freedom) in 2002. After steadily improving for a decade, it scored 64 in 2013. Singapore, on the other hand, has been quite steady. It scored 66 in 2002 and 67 in 2013, fluctuating around that level during the decade.

In general, the people I have spoken to from Russia and Venezuela feel that their countries are moving towards less media freedom and more censorship. This corresponds with Freedom House's index. Russia scored 66 in 2002, compared to a low 81 in 2013. All of my Venezuelan interviewees claim that the situation has become worse for journalists in Venezuela after Nicolás Maduro became president in 2013. Venezuela scored 78 in 2013, lower than the 68 in 2002, which confirms the impression of my sources.

By comparing the results in the four different countries, one may speculate why journalists use the different methods to circumvent censorship in different countries, and if different governmental structures allow for different journalistic practices.

Russia has nominally got a parliamentary system, but the Duma is generally considered a rubber stamp parliament. Most of the power is vested in the President. The power is highly centralised and concentrated in the hands of the President and a small group of his close confidantes. The media is

mainly controlled by the state through state-owned media (and by local authorities through media owned by them) and individuals close to the authorities. This leaves room for smaller private media that are not owned by people close to the President and foreign owned enterprises to operate at least partially freely.

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy, with a conservative society, and a large and devout Muslim population. Censorship is often accepted for cultural reasons, also by journalists. Strict media laws means that it is hard for the media, whether big or small, to openly challenge the censors. This may be the reason journalists have to hide sensitive content within seemingly more compliant articles, and let the readers read between the lines.

A relatively open market economy may be the reason business newspapers are given a little bit more freedom than the rest of the media. While disclosure of corruption may embarrass politicians, such revelations may also help to make the economy more transparent and more inviting for foreign investors.

Singapore has a parliamentary government structure. As in Malaysia, Singapore has strict media laws, and as in Malaysia journalists hide messages in their articles, the “hidden gems”, as B. N. Balji calls them. Singapore has an open, trade-oriented economy, which is almost free of corruption. One could then perhaps expect that the business media were given more freedom, as in Malaysia, but that is not the case, according to Balji. But the open economy could explain the relative freedom of the online media. In an economy almost wholly dependent on international trade, limiting the internet, such an important information sharing tool for international business, would perhaps be seen as a contradiction.

Of the countries I have studied, it seems that Venezuela has the worst conditions for journalists. The fact that two of my sources there wanted to be anonymous speaks for itself. Venezuela is a republic with a centralised government structure, where the government has taken control over large parts of the media. The difficult conditions for independent journalism and fear of retributions from the government explains why Venezuelans operate media from abroad and send stories to newspapers in other countries instead of publishing them at home.

The opposition media are highly partisan, and give the journalists little room for balanced reporting. This would help to explain why the Venezuelan people have turned to social media for reliable information, and experienced journalists use this as an outlet.

Authoritarian regimes that are not totalitarian dictatorships allow for some freedom of the press. From the information I have gathered, it seems that journalists will always find some room for manoeuvring within the set limits, and push the boundaries of what can be published. The methods will vary, but as long as there are cracks in the system, journalists will exploit them. How much additional media freedom this gives is debatable. In many cases the governments will crack down on journalists that go too far. But a little bit of freedom seems to encourage people to seek more.

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